

BOOKS IN BRIEF: What Ghosts Know

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Traci Brimhall, *Our Lady of the Ruins* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012, 96 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Cole Swensen, *Gravesend* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 96 pp, \$21.95 paper)

One of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems asserts:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.

I love this brief meditation on the power of the imagination to overcome the scarcity of the actual. As a poet myself, I make it a rallying cry, a reminder that it's my job to make prairies in the reader's mind, to build on the page bees as buzzy as the real thing. I suppose, in the end, Dickinson's little *ars poetica* is a comfort to me, both as writer and as citizen of a troubled world. Maybe in my tendency to repeat this poem to myself on hard days I'm clinging to its whisper of hope that what the world fails to supply, words might continue to offer, that image (and its counterpart, memory) might be as sustaining as clover.

But the truth is I doubt this assertion. And I don't usually go to poetry for comfort (or not exactly, or not just).

Even the comfort I manage to take from Dickinson's poem is diminished by my knowledge that these days bees *are* few. And temperatures are rising. I need not recite here the catalog of catastrophes that have already begun: heat waves and fires, flooding, drought, and all the human suffering that results from the increased competition over dwindling resources. There are those of course who doubt the veracity of climate science, or deny it out of greed, but I'm more interested in those who believe yet turn away from its warnings, perhaps because I must to some extent count myself among them. The enormity of the problem is just too big to grasp, too awful to look at straight on for very long without reaching for some escape, some comfort. We may find this comfort in a calm pragmatism—the apocalypse, after all, keeps not arriving. We may find it in the still staggering beauty of the earth itself—every spring, bird song, leaf bud, fox cub, flower—or in the promise of salvation from a higher authority, secular or sacred. Or in the ease of our luxurious

nihilism (iPhone, Xbox, Lexus), the notion that we will live our seventy years and pass on to oblivion, that nothing we do now will matter then.

Whatever our balm of choice, it's a poison that distracts us from this moment. Right now we are quite capable of real changes that would stave off the worst effects of global warming. But making those changes requires a willingness to remain in the difficult present. By *we* I mean you, yes, but also me. I go to poetry, then, as a training ground for steadying my gaze, for inhabiting this place, this moment. In Traci Brimhall's darkly beautiful *Our Lady of the Ruins* and Cole Swensen's haunted and haunting *Gravesend* I find just what I need—poems that won't let me escape, that hold me here and teach me to read this moment as a trace left by history, a mark we make on the future, poems that school me both to my own impermanence and to the permanence of all my actions.

Our Lady of the Ruins evokes a vivid and ongoing aftermath. We are never quite sure what the survivors have survived, but we read of “women dancing in basements during the raids” and “girls who traded their bodies to soldiers for bread.” “Wind sings through bullet holes in the windows,” while the book's recurring collective “we” “hold[s] still to learn eternity.” Gunfire along with natural disasters (floods, sandstorms, and cyclones) punctuates swaths of time otherwise filled with watching, searching, waiting, and predicting—endless iterations of interpretation, attempts to read the old world and the new one in which the survivors can't help living. Nuns, priests, and penitents populate a landscape haunted by a frightening and partially shrouded past:

Signs on the trees say it is forbidden
to take your life in the woods,
but people sway from branches,

swords rust between their ribs.

As I read, it feels increasingly urgent that I and these variously damned villagers interpret such signs accurately, yet our efforts are hampered, the signs both vivid and opaque, like hieroglyphs or fragments of Sappho. History is here and gone at once, what it means a matter of speculation or rumor. In “The Colossus,” the speaker describes the villagers' attempts to trace it:

In the beginning, none of us could tell rock
from bone. Some claim the desert was once a sea,
and the statue we found facedown in the sand

was a god who hardened as the waters dried.
Others say raiders stole it from an imperial city
but buried it when they discovered its curse.

Though the survivors are dogged in their pursuit of revelation,
stone yields its secrets slowly: "Our mallets grow worn, our
dowels / dull. The earth falls away, and still it hides // its face
from us."

When frustrated by their failed efforts to read the past,
Brimhall's steadfast pilgrims turn to divination, beseeching a
series of oracles to tell them what the future holds. In "How
to Read a Compass," one such seer intones a set of cryptic
instructions: "Take the blackbirds from your hair and lay them
in the grass. If their eggs hatch in your hands, go north." In
these utterances we glimpse some of the disoriented desperation
at play. Soon, though, the strangeness starts to reveal its sense:
"Take the gold from your neighbor's river and throw it at the
stained-glass hymn. The words that don't break are a message."
This gold (remnant of an unequal economic system?) and this
hymn (trace of the "ecclesiastical terror" to which Brimhall's
speakers repeatedly refer?) may have led to disaster and should
not be regarded as useful tools for moving forward. The survivors
might need to bury the gods that they discover are cursed.

The speaker concludes the poem by instructing her listeners to
"Find the village besieged by war where the monk set himself
on fire in protest. Find the immaculate muscle which did not
burn, and take it." The speaker, then, instructs the listeners
(one of whom is now clearly the reader, who inhabits a "real"
world history) to locate what has not been destroyed and salvage
it—but only if it is untainted (a spirit of relentless protest? a
speaking of truth to power?). What remains when the survivors
have discarded old cultural comforts may then be worth
salvaging. Again we see that to discern which vestiges to carry
over into the new world requires an act of sustained attention.
If those who speak in Brimhall's lyrics can't make sense of the
partly buried "before," can't manage to predict what is to come,
they still don't abandon the enterprise of interpretation so

crucial to survival. They dig and improvise; they evaluate and invent and discard ritual; they beseech and curse and resurrect and exorcise their deities, finding their way through a process of elimination that requires them to read every trace.

In the world mapped by *Our Lady of the Ruins*, no confident trajectory exists from wrongheadedness to wisdom; on the contrary, we may see in the same poem signs of both stunting and clarifying vision. “Unharméd / but not safe,” Brimhall’s bewildered refugees long for and fear salvation, but never deny complicity. They confess relentlessly—nothing and no one in these poems possesses or even claims innocence. One speaker laments, “We want to forget the wayfarer we hung / when he asked for food”; another tells us, “I am responsible to what I have witnessed. I have eaten the eyes of the enemy.”

Much of the language in this collection evokes a hazy Christianity, remnant of the cultural past that the speakers (even the priests) assess continuously. Daily, they build new gods and burn the old ones, burying their ashes in the sea. Often religious and political guilt are conflated, as in “Prayer to the Deaf Madonna,” where the speaker tells us, “Yes, I profited from war. My children lived. / They ate apricots and honey.” Though this speaker turns, briefly, to beseeching the unresponsive Madonna to help her forget her trespasses, she’s all the while busy contending with what the war wrought: “I have to disguise fugitives, to wrap the dead // in flags, to bring the wounded water / and a priest, and I have my country, / I have my country to fear.”

If the fearsome country stands vividly before this speaker, her god (an artifact made in the image of the father) grows increasingly distant, breathless, and unreal. The sailor-slaves who speak “Dance, *Glory*” insist, “There is no paradise // waiting for us, so why ask for miracles?” pointing to the captain who branded them and “sang / to the lightning as he swept ashes from his burning ship.” Brimhall’s band of seekers is apocalyptically free in the aftermath of God’s disappearance; they “drift the treasonous sea,” floating “on the backs of dead sailors . . . / naming constellations of amputated saints.” Whether they will sink or swim neither they nor we can discern.

But I find I am heartened, if not comforted, by the fact that so many of Brimhall's speakers (to whom I find myself attached) recognize their limitations and enact through their utterances a kind of cultural exorcism. In "To My Unborn Daughter," a pregnant woman warns her girl-to-be, "Do not // believe their dusty proverbs. . . . / They'll tell you we are banished, but this isn't exile. // It's a refuge from a nation of titans." These characters are speaking a tentative truth that opens the possibility that they will act differently. They tell us a good fear is useful. By killing their gods, untying their women, by "stitch[ing] . . . their] eyelids open" to "look . . . at the sun," they make it possible to continue. In this searing moment, this sustained and honest and painful seeing, I locate the best chance for survival—theirs, ours. I find I am one of Brimhall's bewildered, complicit, dogged, desiring pilgrims, and that the world she depicts is this one, mine.



What Brimhall creates through a compelling cast of ragtag characters, by dramatizing a moment from which we can't look away, Cole Swensen achieves through a combination of formal invention and a sustained reading scholarly in its depth and breadth. With *Gravesend*, Swensen gives us a dreamy, haunted hybrid, a theory of ghosts presented in a mixture of lucid, sturdy prose and fragmented, perpetually beginning, prematurely clipped lyrics. As such, she enacts formally a state of productive liminality similar to the mythic uncertainty Brimhall establishes. Both books are full of specters and shades; both ask us to remain for extended periods in the difficult, astonishing space between knowing and not, where "every face is the ghost of an instant."

In a way that makes clear that the present is always aftermath and precursor, *Gravesend* catalogs a host of revenants, occurrences of return and rupture, and layerings of time and place. Not surprisingly, she locates ghosts in houses, re-occupants who "erode . . . the line between being and place," but she also finds them in histories and paintings. She investigates by means of etymology, common usage, rumor, and speculation the hauntedness of texts and of language itself. The title of the collection participates in this etymological investigation: one section of the book consists of Swensen's interviews of actual

residents of Gravesend about the meaning of the name of the English town. They tell her it “makes me think of engravings and grayscales” or that the word morphed from Graff de Sham, literally “the home of the Sheriff.” Some say the reach of orchards—the apples Gravensteins—ended there on the outskirts of London, or that other towns sent their plague victims to Gravesend for burial.

Swensen shifts between reporting the inhabitants’ derivations in grammar-bound prose and her own elliptical meditations:

As if the grave could end, said a ship, this fog
is not among the listed would have shifted in and out of
 light in a way most
unbecoming, it unbecame and floated just inches over the
 water was not found
in the morning.

In these lines we spot one characteristic means by which Swensen’s work trains the gaze, holding the reader in the present moment. By repeatedly thwarting expectations for logical structure, the this–then–that narrative of the conventional prose sentence, Swensen demands our honed attention to the sharp but elusive fragment and thwarts the accustomed leap to resolution. We are *here*, again and again. Our words, though, are haunted by sound/music and association, by linguistic provenance, and by personal and cultural history. As Lacan insisted, language speaks us, the surest means through which the past pushes its way into the present. Each of us needs to recognize we have inherited a ghost language freighted with meanings that we may dimly or not at all perceive, that appear in our utterances as traces, blind spots others may see/read from the corner of the eye. It’s “the shock of recognition on the face of the dying // that, in a Rembrandt sketch, or I saw it once / in a painting by Ingres, though he had not / put it there.”

In the landscape of *Gravesend* none of us ghosts or will-be ghosts (a distinction Swensen makes academic with her fragments, elisions, and layers) escapes “the wheel” of time. In one of the more fragmented poems in the collection, “Who Only Living,” she describes knowing as “a grey scale,” ghosts, words, and living beings “always ambiguous,” unpaintable, unsayable, known only by their effects “on leaves on trees on things

in the world.” Indeed the fragments in these poems are themselves ghostly; we experience them as disembodied half breaths on the backs of our necks; we begin to perceive them, that is, and as soon as we attend—gone.

The speakers in the fragmented utterances beseech history, asking the dead to reveal what the past might mean, but like Brimhall’s dead prophets, Swensen’s “remain / indeterminate and cold” though “the dead were thought to know everything.” The living figures in “History” expect this wisdom from the dead because they see ghosts as “suspended in the middle of the story,” yet both here and in Brimhall’s poems the living seem the most suspended—trapped where “God is slow and the face you see at the window / is your own,” trapped, as Brimhall has it, between “the garden” and “the singing bones.” The middle of the story is the best, the only, and the hardest place to be, particularly if one can make no sense of either death or prophesy, a problem Swensen seems no more eager to resolve than Brimhall. Here we sit, then, “stretching [our] arms out so far they would hurt,” holding “a candle in the burning hand as the cradle [goes] up in snow.”

But if, in this dauntless, delicate book, we are tempted to assert that we know we are temporary, that “There is no cure // for anything,” and that the grave has no end, Swensen unseats even our certainty that the grave is an end without diminishing the weight of mortality. In “Kent” she claims, “Once there was a death / that seemed to deserve it, but that was an illusion. Once there was a / death, but that was illusory, too. And all over Kent, someone is still / heading up the stairs, lighting the way with a match.”

In Swensen’s poems we are already ghosts, haunting our own present moment like light from dead stars. She describes an encounter in “Varieties of Ghost” with that “errant” who

faces you and is not so empty, now it turns back and faces you
that remembered you that forgot to say something was
forgotten because the day

arrayed itself in overlapping screens a superimposition of
scenes in which

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someone a century later crossing a street turns around too
quickly and there you are

a rip in the air through which the endless endlessness that
replaces us calmly stares

Time here becomes not only endless but simultaneous, tangled in such a way that we can't tell anymore who is haunting whom, our own solidity thrown into terrifying question as we're projected as the past of a future we won't live to see but which may somehow see us. Swensen makes us all, then, both fleeting and omnipresent, both indelible and already dead: "And silently trailing through me will you ever be / a sound in an empty house an inexplicable mark that, washed off, grows dark."

This may be, for me, the most important message in *Gravesend*, in which ghosts are much less an emblem of transcendence than a blending of mortality and eternity. We will live only so long in these bodies, yes, but we will, each of us, haunt history, and the earth, forever. As Swensen observes in "Old Wives' Tales," "*Whatever you do is forever done.*" My footprint—whether existential or carbon—marks, matters.

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And so we might return to Emily Dickinson, who tells us, "Nature is a haunted house—but Art—is a house that tries to be haunted." Nature haunts *Our Lady of the Ruins*, whose landscape evokes a pre-industrial lushness more than a post-apocalyptic wasteland. A single image drawn from among many—"minnows // swimming in a drowned girl's lungs"—contains all the news we need for us to recognize that the earth and its creatures are both tenacious and fragile, that animals (crows, deer, wolves, people) live and kill and eat and mate and die and give rise to more life. Nature—human nature included—is beautiful and murderous; it takes no interest in our individual desires or fears, nurturing and destroying indifferently. Only we would-be ghosts are capable of reading the signs and acting on them. *Our Lady of the Ruins* and *Gravesend*, through their precise and slippery visions, their relentless intelligence, and their gorgeous, burning music, make me want always to apprehend what the haunted moment holds and to take care what kind of traces I leave behind, what kind of ghost I am.